New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"In Any Language"

Daily Mirror

October 9, 1952

'In Any Language' Has Lots of Laughs

By ROBERT COLEMAN

It was a case of almost, but not quite, at the Cort Theatre last evening, when Jule Styne and George Abbott preemed "In Any Language." Edmund Beloin and Henry Garson have penned a script that boasts so many laughs—something the season hasn't had enough of so far—that it is regrettable they didn't add up to a more satisfying event.

Beloin and Garson have sought to do a slick, sophisticated and satiric comedy, but have finally settled for a rather forced, sometimes labored, farce. They are concerned with a slipping Hollywood star who goes to Italy in an effort to restore her prestige and box-office draw in one of those super-realistic pictures designed for our art theatres.

By a far-fetched coincidence, her husband, who thinks he has been divorced but hasn't, pops up in Rome as the prosperous proprietor of a European airline. To make a long story short, they are finally re-united after the would-be Duse is told by her temperamental megaphoner that she can't act.

Maestro Abbott has directed the new arrival with verve and skill. He is a master of detail. He knows how to make frail situations seem like robust and rewarding ones. And few of his peers have his genius in using dialogue with such contrapuntal effect.

In this instance, Abbott has assembled a cast that takes readily to his style of staging. Uta Hagen impersonates the Grade-B Bernhardt with infectious enthusiasm. She sweeps through the three acts like a devastating hurricane. Her vitality is amazing.

Walter Matthau is an admirable foil for Miss Hagen's tempestuous performing. He has a wry, amusing touch. They succeed in transforming several scenes into irresistible hilarity. If they never quite win your sympathy or belief, it's not their fault, but rather that of the authors. It's almost impossible to put heart and a measure of depth into writing that lacks them.

Joe De Santis, as the impractical movie-maker, does exceptionally well by an under-written part. He, of the entire company, strikes the only note of acceptable sincerity. Salutes also are due Gloria Marlowe and Francine Bond, two gifted beauties about whom you will be hearing a lot in the future. They have talent to match their extraordinary good looks. Oh yes, and a note about Eileen Heckart. She's a most promising comedienne.

Though candor compels us to state that the faults outweigh the virtues of "In Any Language," it is only fair to report that a majority of first-nighters appeared to embrace it whole-heartedly. Their applause and laughter can best be described as lusty. Perhaps they weren't looking for subtleties and nuances. Perhaps all they wanted was a chance to laugh. And that they did with gusto.

"IN ANY LANGUAGE"

Play by Edmund Beloin and Henry Garson, from a story by Mr. Garson; staged by George Abbott; settings and costumes by Raoul Pene du Bois; presented by Jule Styne and Mr. Abbott at the Cort Theatre, October 8, 1952. The cast:

Valerie McGuire..Eileen Heckart
Porter.....Fred Porcelli
2nd Porter.....Giorgio Spelvino
Signore Rossi..Dino Terranova
Charlie Hill....Walter Matthau
Hannah King.....Uta Hagen
A Little Waiter.....Joe Verdi
Beansy Oliver...Louis Hawkins
Marchesa Sporenza..Nita Naldi
Della Fontana...Gloria Marlowe
Aldo Carmenelli..Joe De Santis
A Turkish Gentleman.....
Maurice Gosfield
Mama Carmenelli.....
Rossana San Marco
Lorenzo.....Robert Ottaviano
Grandi.....Lee Papell
Fawzieh.....Francine Bond
Little Girl.....Karin Flanagan
Boy.....Jove Paone
Signore Mazzi...Alfred Bascetta
Signore Zucco...Philip Barbera

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 9, 1952

'In Any Language' Is Splashy Play

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

About the most interesting thing that can be said for "In Any Language" is that it reminds whoever sees it that Uta Hagen knows a great many ways of dealing with a comedy line.

The new show is a splashy affair, loosely put together, with story lines that overlap without blending, and characters that are rarely funny except when they manage to remind you of their real prototypes.

On paper you might say that the idea of a fading American picture star attempting a comeback with one of those blood and thunder, back to nature Italian directors, is pretty funny. But the obvious exaggeration of the people it deals with makes the play demand more than the usual wit. "In Any Language," it hasn't got it.

Falls Into Sewers.

Miss Hagen enacts a girl of the Dixie Lee, Sue Carol era, who manages to get herself cast as an Italian bordello fugitive who falls into sewers. She proves so bad that the director makes her a mute. And the picture is so loosely financed that the actress' former husband has to chip in, only to find she is fired and also still married to him.

The star wears all kinds of costumes, from Apache blouses to beaded fringe sheathes. She does everything humanly possible to make the lines funny, and frequently succeeds, although a wig gets the biggest laugh of the evening.

Where Miss Hagen is unable to overcome her handicaps is in providing any premise of character for a loosely written role. Thus her laughs range from the Dumb Dora type through Sadie Thompson to high comedy, without much consistency.

Walter Matthau Scores.

The star is able to play just about every emotion imaginable except the one which might have made the play a good deal more palatable—that of enjoying herself.

Walter Matthau is entirely on a happy track with the role of the actress' aviator husband, and Joe de Santis has found the insinuating if not the domineering qualities for the director.

Gloria Marlowe makes some vivid flashes in her role as a young Italian actress, and Eileen Heckart is an agreeable secretary. Nita Naldi of silent pictures makes a handsome and imposing appearance as an Italian countess, and Louis Hawkins, night club keyboard artist, is her one man retinue.

New York Post

October 9, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Hollywood Actress in Rome

There is all the quality of a long and involved private joke in the comedy by Edmund Beloin and Henry Garson called "In Any Language," which opened at the Cort Theater last night. Actually, the joke can't be very private, since the jest deals with the making of Italian films, the presumable eccentricities of Latin movie directors, and the alleged longing of declining Hollywood actresses to do pictures with these directors in Rome, which are topics supposedly familiar to millions of Americans. Maybe they'll appreciate every line of "In Any Language."

It is my guess, though, that, instead of profiting by the widespread current interest hereabouts in motion pictures from Italy, the new play is more likely to set back the local popularity of these imported films several years. Certainly, "In Any Language" is filled with what I take to be intimate and authoritative satirical detail about the Italian cinema: its quality and subject matter, its weakness for sordid realism and nonprofessional actors, its lack of financial resource, and its apparently somewhat pretentious ambitions. Perhaps all this detail is a virtue.

Film Shoptalk

Virtue or not, I have a gloomy suspicion that the authors have leaned pretty heavily, not only on their inside knowledge of what goes on in the Roman studios, but also on the shoptalk of Hollywood. For instance, there is at least one gag which, as nearly as I could follow it, depends on a fairly intimate appreciation of the prose style and character of Hedda Hopper. And I suppose that the amount of enjoyment you will derive from the play will be based to a large extent on your knowledge of which particular screen actresses are being parodied.

I am quite willing to concede that comedies having to do with specialized shoptalk and the identification of their characters with actual people can often be funny to the outsiders. A lot of playgoers in a number of countries certainly enjoyed "The Man Who Came to Dinner" despite their lack of any great familiarity with the life and times of the late Alexander Woollcott. The important thing is that the play be funny in itself, and here is where I think "In Any Language" is seriously lacking. Its humors seem to me curiously desultory.

Career Trouble

Although George Abbott has a well-deserved reputation for staging farces with speed and ingenuity, the new comedy takes an unhappily long time to pass any given pointlessness. Its story of the Hollywood actress from frivolous musical films, who wants to take up a serious histrionic career under the guidance of an Italian movie genius, and has a lot of trouble with the language, the peculiarities of filmmaking in Rome, and her dashing aviator-husband, is not only lacking in the required amount of brightness and humor but rambles endlessly.

In the vitally important role of the actress, Uta Hagen plays with considerable resource, but it is my impression that she lacks the dash, sparkle and virtuoso brilliance that the part demands. Walter Matthau, who looks as if he were ready to enact the title character in a film biography of Charles Addams, the cartoonist, again plays engagingly as the aviator. Joe De Santis seems credible as the director, but I thought the most effective performance was contributed by Gloria Marlowe as one of those sexy Italian actresses. "In Any Language" is feeble fooling.

New York Herald Tribune

October 9, 1952

'In Any Language'

By WALTER F. KERR

"In Any Language," which Jule Styne and George Abbott presented at the Cort Wednesday night, is an energetic try at stretching a fifteen-minute revue sketch into a full-length farce. Authors Edmund Beloin and Henry Garson have started off with a likely enough notion: that it would be fun to tangle a Hollywood doll with a soulful, volatile Italian director of the Rosselini-cum-realism school. Mr. Abbott has directed it with his customary expedition, Uta Hagen has been given a chance to display her perfectly real talents as a broad comedienne, and Raoul Pene du Bois has whipped up a fine, sugar-coated Roman hotel room to set the rococo flavor of the romantic goings-on.

• • •

But the material just won't stretch. Once we have met the devastating Hannah King and learned that she is currently without either a Technicolor commitment or a husband, and once we have met the director who has made his entire reputation casting his relatives and filming most of his action in sewers, we have just about run through the authors' capacity for invention. They do hit upon a funny sequence now and then: there is a bright bit as the assembled company watches the day's "rushes" on an invisible screen and we gather the painful truth about the film from the sound effects alone. And there are flashes of wit when the director-genius is ecstatically toasting himself, or when the Betty Grable of a few years back is industriously trying to Italianize herself.

For the most part, though, the authors must pad furiously. They haven't really found a situation sturdy enough, complicated enough, or amusing enough to carry their two frantic figures through the evening, and they must finally fall back on the stock gimmicks of Hollywood satire.

Thus there is a rehearsal scene in which the actress cannot remember her lines. There is the insinuating "have-you lived?" approach on the part of the director. There is the phoney dramatic recital of a family background dreamed up by the star's publicity men. There is the turgid description of a Hollywood epic co-starring Don Ameche. And there is, finally, the conveniently amiable ex-husband to turn up and keep the plot going.

To a lot of this Uta Hagen brings great deftness and an extra dimension. She has found for herself an engagingly gawky manner and an open-mouthed honesty that would do any Vine St. starlet proud. She flounces around in a beaded gown, and lights into a hip-swinging Movietone version of "Turn on the Heat," with all the abandon needed. And when she is having her breakfast Roman style —spearing her bread with a knife and dunking it in chianti—or when she is wearily trudging onto a balcony to feed some disinterested pigeons, she brings legitimate character to a roughly-drawn cartoon.

But for all the warmth and virtuosity she brings to the part, casting Miss Hagen may have been a mistake. These full-bodied, quite plausible humors get to clashing with the broad, obvious, and second-rate writing. We have no sooner begun to believe in the actress than we are stopped by the kind of gagging which labels a film "Desire Under the Grapes" or the extravagant stage business of having her lover leap over a sofa into her arms. The play takes to teetering between comic levels and never does develop a single style.

Walter Matthau slouches, scowls, and shouts his way through the handy role of the ex-husband with considerable skill, and he is delightfully funny as he tries to follow a wayward conversation through a Martini fog. Mr. Abbott has staged a reunion scene between the unhappy lovers with dry amusement, and Mr. Matthau and Miss Hagen are at their best in it.

Nita Naldi, siren of silent films, makes two brief appearances and looks as dashing as ever. Joe de Santis is suitably explosive as the director, and Gloria Marlowe struck me as an extremely promising ingenue in the part of a peppery youngster who has broken into the movies while stealing charcoal.

"In Any Language" works up some laughter now and then, but most of it is pretty easy stuff. And the evening as a whole is lamentably thin.

Journal American

October 9, 1952

Uta and Cast Make This a Funny Show

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE assorted talents of Uta Hagen, Walter Matthau, and Joe De Santis plus the deft and dependable hand of George Abbott, the director, have combined to create quite an hilarious evening from "In Any Language" the new Edmund Beloin-Henry Garson comedy that opened at the Cort Theatre last night.

It is doubtful that the play itself would have been more than mildly acceptable without this happy combination of casting and direction, for many of the lines are labored and the situations are reminiscent. They bring in a small Turkish gentleman who leers and looks funny in a fez, they resort to false hair, they employ an old slapping bit from vaudeville, and the usual brace of comical waiters and such.

But the overall effort bears such a professional stamp, the timing is so exact, the gestures and inflections so adroit, that one doesn't worry too much about the bits and pieces. There was almost continual laughter at the Cort last night, and I think it will probably continue for many months.

Fading Queen

THE BELOIN - GARSON story concerns a fading Hollywood movie queen who goes to Rome to seek a new career. She is just making some progress with the current directorial genius, Carmenelli, when her estranged American husband turns up. He thinks they are divorced but it ain't so—she never got the final decree.

As you can guess this leads to a lot of complications, none of them new. The husband falls in love with his wife again and spends the night; they quarrel again; the director decides HE will marry her. You get the idea.

Through all this there is a very amusing satire on the Italian methods of making movies, a particularly fetching rehearsal scene in which the usual troupe of Roman character actors are coached by the volatile director in a vain effort to get some performance out of the Hollywood star.

And there is a particularly engaging breakfast bit, the morning after Miss Hagen has allowed her husband to remain overnight.)

Speaking of Miss Hagen, everybody seemed to agree that whatever the fate of this vehicle she will emerge as a formidable farceuse—a far cry from her heavy duty in "The Country Girl" and "Streetcar."

Among other things she sings a song and does a dance, and exhibits a rare familiarity with the double-take, the delayed line, the slow burn. Much of this must be credited to Abbott's direction, but who amongst us can decide where one leaves off and the other begins?

Inspired Casting

JOE DE SANTIS is a case of inspired casting, since he looks like a composite photo of all the photos of Italian directors we've seen and is an extremely gifted actor as well.

Walter Matthau, as the husband, has the agreeable ability of playing comedy without contortion, all the while seeming a normal young man who is quite surprised to find himself in various strange predicaments.

In addition I approved the performances of Eileen Heckart, as the secretary; Dino Terranova as the hotel manager; Gloria Marlowe as the Italian actress; Louis Hawkins as an effeminate expatriate and Nita Naldi, as the marchesa.

The single set, the drawing room of a lavish suite in a Roman hotel, was pleasantly impressive and the costumes, especially Miss Hagen's prostitute uniform, were imaginative and amusing. For both these departments credit Raoul Pene du Bois.

This should not be the great comedy of the year, but it makes the season look brighter at the writing.

DAILY NEWS

October 9, 1952

Lots Of Jokes 'In Any Language'

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

Well, I—using the critical I, of course—would say right off the bat that if you've never seen "Boy Meets Girl" or "Small Miracle" or "Room Service" or "Three Men on a Horse" or if you've never been to the Cort Theatre or never seen a George Abbott show at Abbott's most carpenter-ish, then I'll say right away that you'll love "In Any Language."

Mr. Abbott aided and abetted Jule Styne in presentation of "In Any Language" and directed same, which arrived last night with Uta Hagen starred. The comedy is about a fading Hollywood star, an Italian genius-type director, an ex-husband, a cynical secretary, assorted walk-ons, many exits, unexplained entrances, ringing telephones, bouncing bon mots, and inexplicable motivation.

It's all there, folks. It's worked before and may, indeed, work once more.

Lark By Uta.

"In Any Language" is a comedy by Edmund Beloin and Henry Garson, from a story by the latter. These writers are unfamiliar to me but they have written some very funny lines and some boffo gagcroos. The story, if there is one, is something else again. Abbott has been called upon to work wonders with stories equally slim, and has eminently succeeded, but this time the task was somewhat monumental. It must have discouraged even the authors when, at every potential funny line, Mr. A. added as a sort of lagniappe more hectic action than can be found in an average pro football game.

In Two Languages.

Uta Hagen is starred in the new comedy. Walter Matthau has an important role and so has Joe De Santis. Miss Hagen has, as ever, a singularly timbreless voice and plays her role as though it is just one of those Tallulah larks. Matthau, who was excellent in his last two melodramas, this time shows little but Actors Studio tricks. He enters (1) with the right shoulder down and exits (2) with the left shoulder down and emotes (3) with both shoulders down and chin 'way out. As the director, De Santis wears a red sports jersey throughout and probably looks a little like Rosselini.

Louis (Goldie) Hawkins, the capable night club pianist, is on and off for a bit or two and so is Nita Naldi—(NITA NALDI!)—as an unexplained marchesa.

There is also a gal named Gloria Marlowe, as the Italian star, who would have been a natural interview for Earl Wilson before Wilson discovered religion and the better life. The set and costumes are by Raoul Pene du Bois.

However, nobody can deny that there are a lot of loud laughs "In Any Language" or even in both languages used. A rivederci, or whatever the hell those actors were saying all night.

The New York Times

October 9, 1952

Uta Hagen in a Comedy About an American Actress Abroad, Staged by George Abbott

By BROOKS ATKINSON

So many people were enjoying themselves so heartily at the Cort last evening that a few churlish words may not be noticed in this corner this morning. Uta Hagen was playing a rowdy American screen actress in a roistering comedy entitled "In Any Language," by Edmund Beloin and Henry Garson. None of those facts is so significant, however, as the basic fact that George Abbott staged the performance at a pace that has not slackened perceptibly since "Three Men on a Horse," "Room Service" and "Boy Meets Girl."

Although the seasons have been tottering by, Mr. Abbott's track time is still youthful. He plunges into these comic steeplechases with the eagerness of a yearling. "In Any Language" is the story of a Hollywood actress who has lost her popularity in America and tries to rehabilitate herself by acting in an art film in Rome. Although she is gaudily respectable on the surface, she is a fake at heart. She fails as an art actress. But the gallant spectacle she makes of herself in Rome wins back the heart of the American flier she married in Hollywood out of respect for his war record.

* * *

To say that "In Any Language" is a synthetic piece of merchandise is beside the point. For Mr. Abbott, a veteran showman, dotes on hocus-pocus; he thrives on it. Working in a happy collaboration, he and the authors have built their comedy into a merry-go-round with a lot of odd characters and dizzy scenes—Arabians, Turks and innumerable Italians, all jabbering away in temperamental crises, all shouting in Italian, English, American and Broadway dialects.

If you are in tune with the ebullience of the evening, everything seems fresh, innocent and funny. If you are not, "In Any Language" looks a little seedy. They have to work so hard to get the laughing going. As the Hollywood opportunist, Miss Hagen rides the tidal wave of bedlam with as much gusto as less gifted actresses. Give her full marks for vitality and sportsmanship. But still the character calls for a coarser, blowzier strumpet than the actress who was playing St. Joan last season. Although Miss Hagen's performance is racy, it is always a performance—more like a well-organized charade than genuine comic acting.

As the Italian cinema maestro, Joe De Santis is full of hot-tempered flourishes and masculine sounds; and Walter Matthau, as the American flier, has a dry sense of humor that suits the occasion admirably. Nita Naldi plays a fiercely solemn lady with an American gigolo on leash, and Gloria Marlowe plays an Italian chippy with conspicuous temperament and anatomy. Eileen Heckart acts the secretary to the Hollywood star with just the right amount of skepticism and poker-faced detachment.

* * *

Raoul Pene du Bois has designed a high, festive Italian hotel room that catches the spirit of the play more successfully, this department thinks, than the authors or director. For "In Any Language" is loud and funny without being spontaneous. Not that the first-night audience shared that point of view. Everyone was roaring and guffawing. Nearly everyone, that is.

"The Sacred Flame"

Journal American

October 8, 1952

Mercy Killing Play Mercilessly Boring

By JOHN McCLAIN

SEVERAL thousand of Mr. Somerset Maugham's choicest words on the subject of euthanasia (mercy killing, to you) were delivered last night at the President Theatre by a distinguished and capable cast, but when the final curtain fell on "The Sacred Flame" one wondered how even a spark had survived the deluge of dialogue.

This is a revival of a play which was produced with almost no success several years ago by Gilbert Miller, but it was believed by the present producer, Anthony Parella, that the public today would be more acceptable to the idea of merciful murder.

That may be true, but I don't think the public is any less critical of a pat and static drama, or is any more prepared to applaud a plethora of platitudes. I had the feeling that the whole thing might have been told to better effect with infinitely less talk.

Muddled Theme

Even the theme is a little muddled. A young husband is paralyzed from the waist down in a plane crash and is relegated to a nurse and a wheel chair. His wife ministers to him faithfully but after five years finally falls in love with his brother, who happens to be visiting in the house, and becomes pregnant. The husband is thereupon dispatched with an overdose of sleeping pills and in the end everybody, including the family doctor, agrees that this is completely kosher.

Isn't that carrying the idea of mercy killing a bit far? Granted the young man wasn't going to get well, the reason for his urgent dismissal was his wife's unfaithfulness, not his acute and hopeless illness.

Forgetting the plot for the moment, and the interminable explanatory speeches, there is the question of casting. I thought Frances Starr, as the mother, and Patricia Wheel, as the wife, and John D. Seymour, as the doctor, and Noel Leslie as the family friend, were eminently well situated, but thought Nancy Coleman, as the nurse, was not. It is she who forces the issue, who finally confesses to a secret love for the crippled husband and through the frustration of her own life perseveres to see that the circumstances of his death are known.

Simple Set

Miss Coleman is too personable for this part; she is young and attractive and one felt that the prospect of a prolonged illness in her care would not have been an excrutiating agony, as the lines suggest. Or that, from her point of view, her romantic horizon would be limited to the cripple for whom she was employed.

The set by Leo Kerz, a drawing room in a British home, was simple and effective within the limited perimeter of the President stage, but I thought the direction of John Reich might have provided more movement during many of the long expository scenes. All evening people seemed to sit or stand in the same place and talk endlessly.

"The Sacred Flame" is faithfully produced and expertly acted, but it sheds a feeble light.

"THE SACRED FLAME"

Play by W. Somerset Maugham; staged by John Reich; settings by Leo Kerz; presented by Anthony Parella at the President Theatre, October 7, 1952. The cast:

Maurice Tabret.....Charles H. McCawley
Dr. Harvester..John D. Seymour
Mrs. Tabret.....Frances Starr
Nurse Wayland..Nancy Coleman
Alice.....Joanna Vischer
Major Liconda.....Noel Leslie
Stella Tabret....Patricia Wheel
Colin Tabret.....Mark Roberts

Daily Mirror

October 8, 1952

'Sacred Flame' Seems Stilted and Shoddy

By ROBERT COLEMAN

We understand that after playgoers showed their resentment of "The Sacred Flame" back in 1928, Somerset Maugham withdrew it from the stage. It is a problem play about mercy killing, a subject which aroused much controversy and opposition in those days. It still does, for that matter, even now.

We honestly think Maugham would have been wise to keep the melodrama out of circulation. For, as produced by Anthony Parella at the President Theatre last evening, it comes over the footlights as stilted and shoddy. It seems less a plea for euthanasia than a defense of unconventional love. It is definitely third-rate Maugham.

It must have seemed daring in 1928 for the brother of an aviator, permanently crippled in an accident, to have an affair with the broken man's wife. And it must have seemed even more daring to have the mother of two sons administer an overdose of sleeping tablets to the paralytic to insure the happiness of the errant lovers.

Maugham explains it all in terms that are often just a little too noble for comfort or conviction. At times, it is on the embarrassing side. Naturally, there are some passages of merit, for a writer of Maugham's talent could not help but demonstrate flashes of his gifts.

Parella has assembled a cast of skilfull players for the revival, including Frances Starr, who soared to stardom under David Belasco's management, and Nancy Coleman and Patricia Wheel, young actresses of quality. Other capables in the company are Charles H. McCawley, John D. Seymour, Noel Leslie and Mark Roberts.

Leo Kerz has designed a setting that makes the most of the President's small stage. John Reich's direction, however, leaves much to be desired. It turns the characters into stuffy, stained-glass stereotypes. It is hard to believe they are real people, and to care very much about what happens to them.

But Miss Starr, in the final act, takes matters into her own hands and scores with an intense, though restrained, explanation of her actions. Noel Leslie also outwits Reich's megaphoning on occasion. It is too bad their associates fail to do likewise.

"The Sacred Flame," in our opinion, offers few rewards. It is a period piece of dubious worth. Certainly not one of the works by which Maugham will be remembered. It is astonishing to us that it could have come from the atelier of the man who gave us "Of Human Bondage," "The Moon and Sixpence," or even "The Constant Wife."

Parella has announced a series of new plays by contemporary authors for the President. It would have been much more interesting had he launched his season with one of them.

DAILY NEWS

October 8, 1952

Maugham's 'The Sacred Flame' Problem of Murder by Devotion

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

Whatever Somerset Maugham's "The Sacred Flame" may lack, it at least boasts the nicest murderer we've had on a stage in years and, furthermore, all the characters talk just like Somerset Maugham characters ought to talk.

First produced here back in 1928 and in England a bit earlier, Maugham's high-mannered whodunit was offered last night at the tiny and fittingly intimate President Theatre by Anthony Parella. The revival has a first rate Broadway cast, featuring Frances Starr, Nancy Coleman and Patricia Wheel, and the producer spent some real loot as well as considerable care in the production.

All the performances were good, and some excellent. Leo Kerz' single setting had a warm and properly friendly tone and he managed to do several interesting tricks with what must be an inadequate lighting system. The direction by John Reich, a graduate of ANTA and the experimental playhouses, seemed pretty stilted to me but it must be admitted that Reich was up against a piece of writing which remains stubbornly in a single key. High-flown, philosophical epigrams drop like pearls.

Murder With Love.

Maugham's Maurice Tabret is a nice guy badly crippled up in a plane smash, useless to himself and the nice wife whom he loves passionately and who appears devoted to him. His nice mother and his nice brother are also at his beck and call. His doctor is a helluva nice fellow and so is his brother and so is an old admirer of his mother.

He is also blessed with the services of a seriously efficient nurse. This nurse is just a little too efficient, it develops, because when everybody accepts Maurice's death as natural heart failure in his sleep she not only makes the accusation of murder but is also able to make it stick. And since she can reveal that Maurice's wife is in love with his brother, and in a pregnant condition by same, everybody connected with this highly civilized family is faced with disgrace and scandal and, even, the hangman's noose.

Good Performances.

A confession, and considerable philosophy by the nicest murderer in town is Maugham's trick finish which takes all suspects off the hook and restores everybody to the graceful life.

As the neurotic and duty-ridden nurse, Nancy Coleman has the most complex role and does a fine job with it. Miss Coleman is ordinarily one of the handsomest redheads in show business—and if you don't believe me read the man in The Morning Telegraph—but she's using her head instead of her looks as Nurse Wayland. Patricia Wheel, as the helpless and trapped wife, did by far the best job of her brief career. This girl is growing and improving so fast that she can't miss a real triumph one of these days.

As the understanding and sympathetic mother, Frances Starr had some brilliant moments in the last act after a somewhat shaky start. Noel Leslie and John D. Seymour were first rate in character roles.

The gentle art of murder has been modernized by the private eye and the tough cop since Maugham wrote his elevated study of it but "The Sacred Flame" is a pleasant enough piece of theatre and everybody connected with it deserves A for effort.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 8, 1952

'The Sacred Flame'

By Walter F. Kerr

There is still a certain verbal grace to Somerset Maugham's experiment with the problem play, "The Sacred Flame," but now, after some twenty-five years, it seems oddly out of place. The piece which was given careful revival at the President last night is concerned with adultery, murder, and the ethics of euthanasia. But the language in which these things are explored is the language of an epigrammatist turned sober. A man whose principal theatrical talent was for high comedy has here delved into much more turbulent matters without abandoning the polite, measured, and rippling syntax which belonged to his lighter style, and the result is an evening in which emotion rarely breaks through a severely polished surface.

Though producer Anthony Parella has assembled an exceptionally able cast for his off-Broadway venture, the company as a whole—perhaps under the urging of director John Reich—tends to play into the balanced Maugham prose rather than against it. Every line, as read, seems to be of precisely the same length. Every line seems to have the same up-hill-and-down-dale construction. And every line seems a separate literary exercise, not much related to the bit of fashionable 1928 rhetoric which has preceded it. The performances are muted and gracious, and the whole thing finally takes on the quality of a lullaby rather than that of a probing and somewhat daring discussion of moral values.

Frances Starr has been persuaded to play the all-wise mother who kills her crippled son rather than expose him to the shattering knowledge that his young wife can no longer be faithful, and she brings to the challenging final scene—a scene of confession and self-defense—a simple and touching sensitivity which is found nowhere else in the production. Attractive Nancy Coleman deals as straightforwardly as possible with the overwrought role of the nurse who has fallen in love with her patient and who insists that his sudden death be investigated. And Patricia Wheel, as the self-sacrificing wife, and Noel Leslie, as a solicitous friend of the family, seemed to me to come closest to sustaining some sort of plausible emotional life beneath Mr. Maugham's never very urgent rhythms.

But they are one and all hemmed in by the cool reserve of this Mayfair melodrama. When the author does occasionally feel the need of more open dramatic statement, things get worse rather than better. Now the lines suddenly flatten out into the "Impossible?" and "Murdered?" ejaculations of routine detective fiction, and at one point Miss Coleman is forced to mutter something that sounded like "Oh, the brutality of sex!" She turns her back as she says it, but even this considerate gesture does not quite conceal the dated fragrance of Mr. Maugham's brief forays into the emphatic. The play otherwise shows its age in some fairly bald expository chatter ("He was such a gallant figure." "One in a thousand") and in the mechanical precision with which the big scenes are announced and ticked off. All in all, the business of social investigation was not Somerset Maugham's happiest vein.

The production has been tastefully mounted—Leo Kerz has succeeded in building a full-scale and suitably handsome oak room into the small stage of the President—and you feel that everything has been done to give the old play a fair trial. But it coasts along gently and garrulously, stirring no fires.

New York Post

October 8, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Mr. Maugham and a Mercy Killing

Recent backward glimpses at the theatrical works of Somerset Maugham indicate that the eminent novelist and playwright is likely to be remembered for his comedies and not his dramas. At least, where Mr. Maugham's "The Constant Wife" proved admirably alive and charming in revival last season, his much graver play, "The Sacred Flame," seemed terribly overwrought and manufactured last night at the President Theater, where it was presented for the first time in these parts since it ran on Broadway briefly in the season of 1928-'29.

In those distant days, although it was slaughtered by most of the reviewers and neglected by the public, I thought it had considerable merit and even suspected that it might conceivably have been ahead of its time. On the basis of last evening's performance, however, I must concede that the other fellows were right about it. Mr. Maugham's story of the mercy killing of a crippled young husband, whose wife has fallen in love with his brother, now seems almost frantically outmoded in its dove-tailed plotting and its well-made bogusness.

Matter of Honesty

It doesn't any longer seem even an honest play. Mr. Maugham may have been completely in earnest in his efforts to probe into a difficult and disturbing moral dilemma, but, somehow, it falls into such cliches of dramatic writing and emotional intensity and reveals such an obstinate determination to be theatrically effective at all costs that, despite the author's attempt to appear startling and anti-sentimental, his play emerges as melodramatic claptrap of a surprisingly artificial order.

By dint of pulling out all stops and seeing to it that every scene and every speech is packed with highstrung emotion, Mr. Maugham, whose theatrical shrewdness is undeniable, has unquestionably given a certain effectiveness to a considerable part of his play. The unfortunate thing about it is that every section of the drama is so carefully fitted together that the final effect is unbelievable in its patness. The playwright has tried to mix sentimentality with cynicism, and the result is that he achieves neither.

Matter of Concealment

Perhaps, if the production had more guilefulness about it, the creaking of the plot machinery and the old-fashioned theatricality of the dialogue might have been better concealed, and I would have been fooled all over again. But, although there are some good performances, there is not the general professional shrewdness and style that could cover up at least a part of the machine-like manipulation that once caused a play to seem well-made and efficient and now provides it with an air of antique ineffectuality.

Some pleasant players are bogged down in Mr. Maugham's highly plotted mechanics. Nancy Coleman, for example, is an interesting actress who is handicapped by the fact that she never seems physically the terrifying and neurotic nurse she is playing, and that splendid veteran, Frances Starr, is forced to become merely a speechmaker as the mother who is the center of the narrative. Patricia Wheel, as the cripple's wife, has a more believable role, and, being a good actress, she plays it well. But "The Sacred Flame" is sadly outmoded.